

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



I remember working for Ernie that summer at his gas station, although he preferred to call it a "service station." He spoke those words slowly, and with emphasis. "A gas station is a place to get gas," he'd tell the help, with a stern look. "We, however, are in the business of selling service." He repeated that saying over and over again, with an evangelical zeal.

Not five feet tall, he was logically and affectionately known as Big Ern. He would actually crawl around inside the engine compartment, giving his pep talks while wrestling cast iron heads that probably outweighed him by 20 pounds. The quality of his work was well-known and generally appreciated by the clientele.

His bays were always full of repair work. Too busy to pump gas himself, he hired and trained youngsters like myself to man the pumps. He taught us how to really wipe a windshield and check fluids under the hood. He taught us to smile, tip our hats, and be as friendly and cooperative as possible—even to the limits of our endurance.

Occasionally, he'd come out from behind the hood of that car to see how things were going in the trenches. He'd join us at the pumps and help wipe windshields, and mirrors, and headlights, and taillights, and the customer's sunglasses if necessary. We'd all end up laughing, joking, and enjoying the heck out of the customers. It looked like Ernie was running for mayor. The man's enthusiasm and optimism were absolutely contagious.

And on the rare occasions when something did go wrong with a car after Ernie had worked on it, the customer didn't have to hunt all over the city to find him. Customer satisfaction meant service with a smile and fair treatment for all.

Don't think for a moment that he was a mindless, groveling twit. He was a tough businessman, smart enough to realize that his customers needed his services enough to pay for them. He didn't just wait for them to realize that fact either. He came right out and tastefully told them, with no hint of boast or brag, exactly how skilled and conscientious he was.

He charged for his services at rates equal to, or greater than the local competition, carefully, specifically explaining why his skills—and his customers' cars—were worth the money.

He trained his customers to care for their vehicles. Gradually, many came to realize that money spent on proper care and maintenance was money saved in the long run.

Here we are 20 years or so later, and now we're

courted by television and radio slogans saying what Ernie really believed way back when. Unfortunately, ad campaigns alone won't equal his kind of day-in, day-out commitment.

During the same time, we've also been swamped by a tidal wave of automotive technology—some good, some seemingly for show. The cars of today are admittedly far more complex than the Galaxies and Impalas Ernie wrestled, take greater skills and training for their proper repair, and lend themselves to the quick fix less often. If anything, the importance of preventive maintenance has increased.

This all brings us back to service. Ernie's kind of service. The care of a vehicle is still a good investment. And people still appreciate the fair, honest, and cordial treatment they receive from a quality businessman/technician.

Unfortunately, many customers need to be told what you can do for them, and reasons why it's important to them. Call it selling if you like. Call it good customer relations. Call it education of the public. Call it whatever you choose, but recognize it as long-term profit potential.

Sell service. Not only as an oil change special. Not as a clearance on snow tires or wiper blades. Sell service as a comprehensive maintenance plan. Sell service as a package, explaining carefully and specifically to customers why that ten minute oil change place can't really give their cars all they need.

Most importantly, take a lesson from Ernie and get into the habit of selling yourself and the quality of service you provide. If you've saved the customer some grief by correcting a small problem before it became a big one, don't just no-charge the customer and forget to tell him. Make him realize how lucky he is to have a conscientious person like you looking after him and his car.

If service with a smile isn't important, then why do you think so many cars are finding their way to independent garages as soon as they're out of warranty? And more importantly, think of the potential for maintenance service while the car is still in warranty. Why wait?

If a customer of yours has an older vehicle, or two, and mentions he bought a new car, offer your services in helping him set up a long-term maintenance plan. Work with him to set a schedule that satisfies the needs of the car, maintains the warranty, and accommodates the customer's budget.

We'd like to start including some service highlights in the coming months to help you sell some of this business. This month we open with a valve adjustment and maintenance highlights on a BMW. We'll do each job ourselves and try to point out any problems or difficulties we run into.

In the meantime, think about this approach as a potential, perhaps untapped source of profit—a new opportunity—and let us know how it goes. Big Ern will be interested, for sure.

—By Ralph Birnbaum